

ALBANIA

THE COUNTRY OF

BESA

THE CODE OF HONOUR THAT
SAVED THE JEWS

HARVARD UNIVERSITY, JANUARY 31, 2017



A history of Albanian-Jewish relations
set in the contemporary context of
religious intolerance

History takes time

The American Jewish writer Gertrude Stein once said:

“History takes time; history makes memory.”

It has taken time to bring to light the remarkable history of Jews saved in Albania.

RESCUE IN ALBANIA

RESCUE IN ALBANIA



ONE HUNDRED PERCENT OF JEWS
IN ALBANIA
RESCUED FROM HOLOCAUST



Harvey Sarnet

SHPETIMI NE SHQIPERI



NJE QINT PERQINT E HEBREJVE
NE SHQIPERI
TE SHPETUAR NGA HOLOKAUSTI



Përktheu nga anglishtja

Mat Berisha

A small Albanian State – a model of religious tolerance

In the wake of the grievous attacks in various countries where several lives were tragically lost because of contempt for freedom of speech and anti-Semitism, it is imperative that we reflect on human qualities that inspire us to become tolerant, compassionate, and sacrificial. A noble and notable illustration of these values can be found in the small Balkan state of Albania.

An Objective

“I have dedicated a good deal of my time and have done my best to disseminate Albanian-Jewish history. This is not merely because I look for recognition for what the people of my country have done, but rather to present to the world a rare model of coexistence, peaceful cooperation, ethnic tolerance and the total absence of anti-Semitism.

www.MalBerisha.com

A UNIQUE MODEL OF HARMONY

Albania provides a unique model of harmony between the Abrahamic religions where the denominations of Christians and Muslims, as well as Jews, have historically demonstrated the capacity to live peacefully in their joint communities.

US CONGRESSMEN – HON. TOM LANTOS AND JOE DIOGUARDI

This story was first brought to light by two American Congressmen, Hon. Tom Lantos and Hon. Joe DioGuardi, following the fall of communism.



JEWISH POPULATION IN ALBANIA TRIPLED DURING THE HOLOCAUST

What is remarkable in the events following World War II is the threefold increase of the Jewish population in Albania. Considering the massive exodus of Jews from other European states, this is an extraordinary phenomenon.

73 ALBANIAN RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS AT YAD VASHEM



73 Albanian families who saved the Albanian Jews as well as others from Germany, Yugoslavia, Austria, Greece, and Macedonia have their names engraved at the Yad Vashem Memorial Museum in Jerusalem, **Righteous among the Nations.**

Some of Albanian Righteous Among the Nations in Jerusalem



Albania – a Safe Haven for Jews

The story of Jews in Albania during World War II is unlike any in the old continent. Not only were the local Jews saved from the Nazi war machine in Albania, but the country was considered a safe haven for all groups of peoples in danger.

ALBANIAN “BESA”

Based on the highest moral values of the *Albanian “BESA”*, thousands of Jews were sheltered unconditionally by ordinary Albanians mostly in rural areas of the country.

What does “BESA” mean?

- BESA is the Code of Honor for Albanians.
- Hamdi Meca, an Albanian scholar, author, son of one of Righteous Among Nations, explains:
“BESA means simply this: If an Albanian gives his word, he will kill his son rather than break it. That is all. BESA lives forever. If an Albanian gave you his BESA and does not fulfill it or cheats you, his honor is lost”
- This is the reason why Albanians saved the Jews.

Not a single Jewish life lost in Albania

- What makes the story of Jews in Albania noble is the fact that no single life was taken on Albanian soil by Nazi aggressors. This was due to the sacrifices of Albanians who risked their own family members to shelter them and also due the generosity of King Zog of Albania who issued an edict to all Albanian consular missions to grant visas to Jews who were at risk. As a result, several hundred made their way to Albania, either using it as a springboard to continue they journeys, or staying in Albania until the end of the war.

The Albanian Hospitality

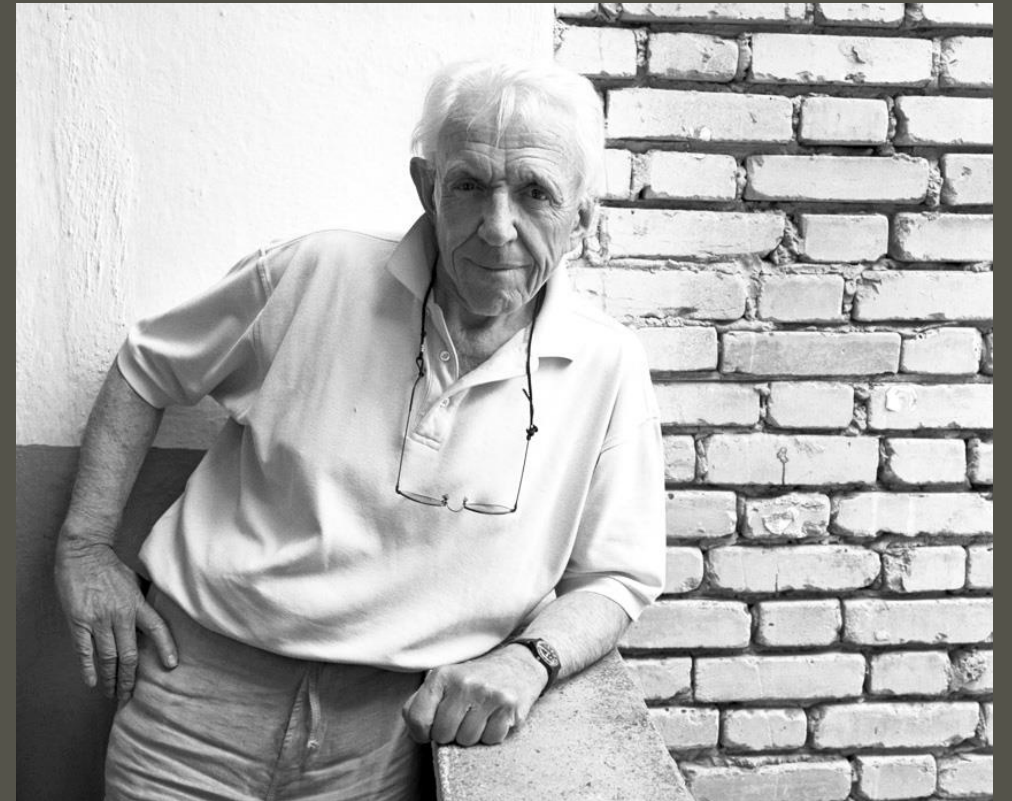
- The Albanian Code of Leke Dukagjini stipulates:
“Every hour of the day and night, a man must be ready to receive a guest with bread, salt and open heart. He must offer him a bed, a pillow, and a warm hearth. Rejecting a stranger when he/she knocks on your door is a shame that creates a stigma forever.”

Albanian Code of Leke Dukagjini - KANUNI

- The house belongs to God and the guest;
- “If an Albanian is treacherous to those who trusted him – his community has a duty to destroy him and no vengeance may be sought for his blood.”
- “All are equal before God. The handsome and the ugly are of equal importance.”
- “A man must defend his guest’s honor even if he endangers his own life in doing so.”

Norman Greshman

Albanians do not have that much to export, but they have a product that is unique in the world: “the Albanian BESA”



INTERESTING STORIES OF
THE JEWS
IN ALBANIA

Bernstein's Interest In Archaeology

The Synagogue in Saranda, Albania

- Remains of the 5th century synagogue of Saranda – in South Albania.
- Twelve such synagogues are supposed to have existed in the Balkans.
- One of them is in ruins in Plovdiv, Bulgaria.



False Messiah Sabbathai Tsevi



Herman Bernstein unveiled the fact that Sabbatai Tsevi is supposed to have died at the river bank of Osumi, Berat, Albania, after years of being interned by Ottomans in Ulqini, at that time part of Albanian territory.

He left a legacy of *Dönme*, and an Islamic sect which does exist still today in Albania.

An American Jewish Journalist, Writer, And Diplomat (1876 – 1935)



Herman Bernstein, US Ambassador to Albania, 1930-1933

Quote by Herman Bernstein

- "There is no trace of any discrimination against Jews in Albania, because Albania happens to be one of the rare lands in Europe today where religious prejudice and hate do not exist, even though Albanians themselves are divided into three faiths."

—Herman Bernstein

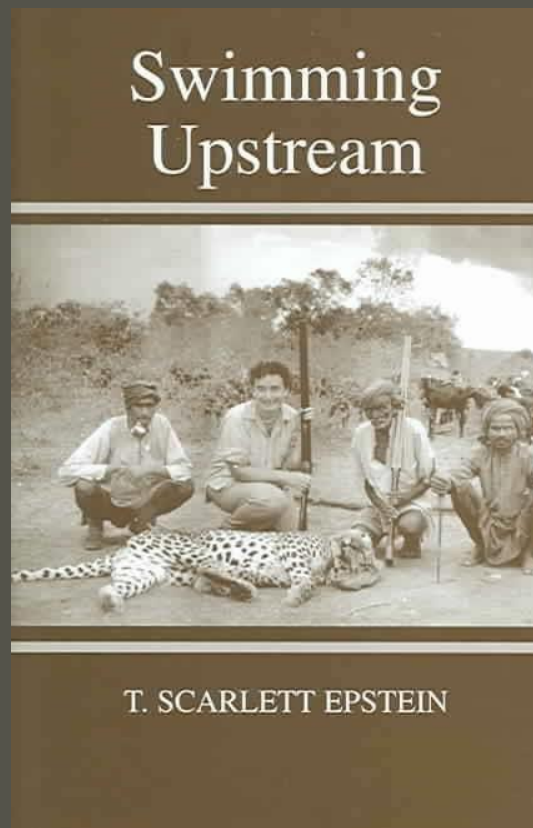
1933 – King Zog Tells His Story To Herman Bernstein

- In a time when Jews all over Europe were being faced with Nazi racism, Bernstein wanted to do something to create a place of refuge for a significant number of Jews.
- King Zog was ready to support him. He ordered all consular missions to grant visa for the Jews.
- The first history of King Zog is the thirty-page document serving as his autobiography.
- It was recorded in English in 1933 by Herman Bernstein, the American Ambassador in Tirana.
- It is considered the life story of the Albanian ruler, told by himself in the third person.
- It provides insight into how King Zog viewed himself and his country's history and development

Bernstein and King Zog speak about a Jewish Safe Haven in Albania



King Zog and Ambassador Bernstein spoke about the possibility of establishing a Jewish safe haven in Albanian territory. Many of them were granted visas



Prof Scarlet Epstein and her family was one of them. She was granted visa in Zagreb. She lived 93 years to tell her story: Albania Saved my Life until 2014.



Professor Scarlet Epstein

Swimming Upstream



T. SCARLETT EPSTEIN

Professor Epstein and her family was one of them. She was granted visa in Zagreb. She lived 93 years to tell her story: Albania Saved my Life until 2014.



Bernstein was decorated by His Majesty, King Zog of Albania

For his contribution to strengthening US - Albanian relations he was decorated by His Majesty, King Zog of Albania with the Star and Knight's Cross of the Order of Skanderbeg.



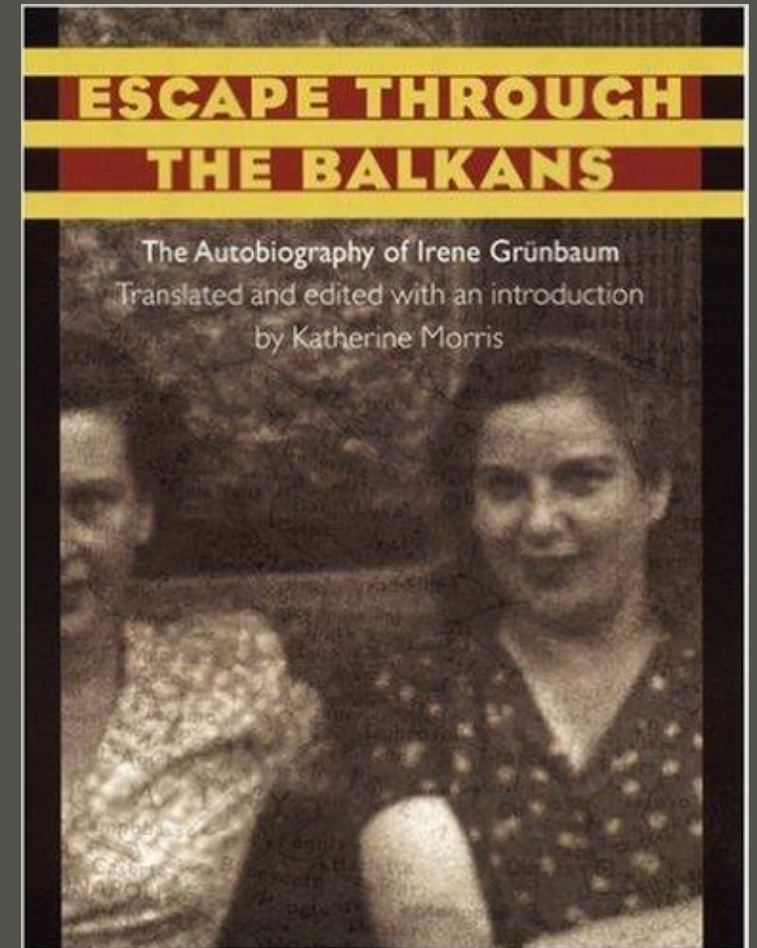
Holocaust survivor Josef Jakoeel & his daughter Felicita

- Felicita Jakoeel, sitting with her father who survived in Albania. They lived in Albania until 1991. The family moved to Jerusalem after fall of communism.



Escape through the Balkans: The Autobiography of Irene Grunbaum

"A breathtaking story by a gifted writer ...It describes the flight of Irene Grunbaum from Belgrade through Albania and Italy and ultimately to Brazil...The fate of the Yugoslavian Jews under the Nazis is not well known. Even less familiar is the wartime experience of the small Jewish community in Albania.



Posing with T. Scarlet Epstein – Jewish Survivor in Albania, 1938-1939



Debby, Prof T. Scarlet Epstein's daughter on the day of funeral:

Mom always kept telling us:

“Say whatever you like, do whatever you want, but don't touch me on this part of my chest [pointing to her heart], because there is a button there, and if you press it, it will automatically start speaking like a doll, saying: **‘Albania Saved My Life, Albania Saved My Life.’**”

Holocaust Survivor Johanna Neumann



JOHANNA NEUMANN:

I was born in Hamburg, Germany, and was fortunate enough to survive with my parents in Albania. We made friends among some of the Albanians. My mother met Mrs. Pilku and it was the family Pilku who rescued us, saved us, hid us in their home during the German occupation.

NUMEROUS ACTIVITIES TO
HONOR THE ALBANIAN –
JEWISH STORIES

A Culture Of Rescue: Celebrating Jewish–Albanian Solidarity Amidst the Holocaust

November 22, 2012



On November 22, 2012, the Albanian Embassy and the Wiener Library in London hosted a special event, “*A Culture of Rescue: An evening celebrating Jewish-Albanian solidarity against the Holocaust*,” at The Wiener Library in London. *BESA* is a code of conduct that stands above religious differences. ...Professor Scarlet Epstein was decorated by the Albanian government. The evening was honored by the Chargé d’Affaires of the Republic of Albania, Mr. Mal Berisha, by the Ambassador of the State of Israel, H.E. Mr Daniel Taub and by Dr Liri Berisha, President and Founder of Mother Teresa Foundation and by the Director of the Wiener Library, Mr Ben Barkow

Holocaust Memorial Service At Middlesex University : The Albanian Besa



On January 20, 2013, Middlesex University in the United Kingdom organized a Holocaust Memorial Service entitled “*The Albanian BESA and the History of Judaism in Albania*” (keynote speaker, Mal Berisha). Albania was the only country in Europe where the Jewish population had increased during the years 1939-45.

Evening of Remembrance at Pinner Synagogue, London

April 17, 2013



On the 70th Anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the theme of the evening was “Resistance and Rescue.” It was an evening of Yom Hashoah to commemorate the history of Albanian-Jewish relations.

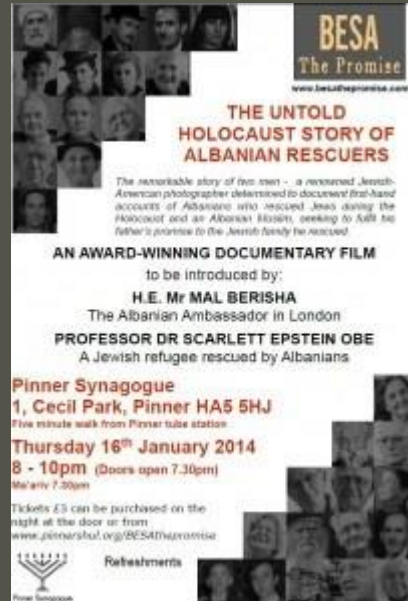
BESA – “THE PROMISE” Jewish Film Festival In London

November 18, 2013



A screening of the film “*BESA – The Promise*” took place at the Tricycle Theatre in Kilburn, London. It conveyed a strong message of Albanian decency towards Jews in a fantastic story of the reunion of a Jewish and an Albanian family after almost 60 years of lost connections.

Albanian BESA to be honored in Pinner Synagogue London



- **THE UNTOLD HOLOCAUST STORY OF ALBANIAN RESCUERS, AN AWARD-WINNING DOCUMENTARY FILM** to be introduced by: **H.E. Mr MAL BERISHA**, Albanian Ambassador in London
- **PROFESSOR DR SCARLETT EPSTEIN OBE**, A Jewish refugee rescued by Albanians, **Pinner Synagogue, 1, Cecil Park, Pinner HA5 5HJ**,

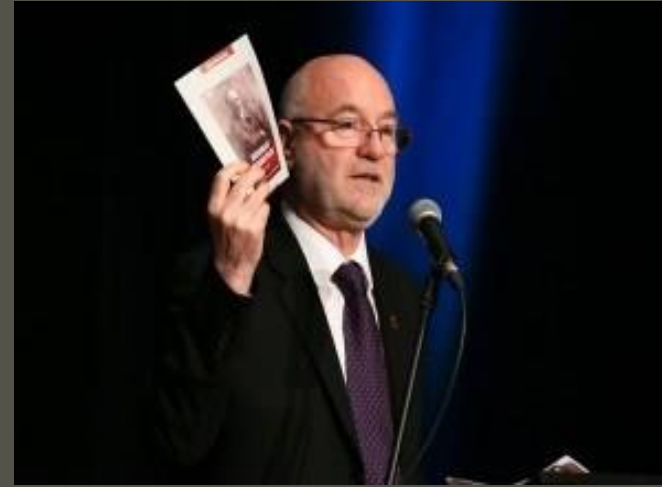
Two Memorial Days In London — Albanian *BESA* is Honored

January 16, 2014



The Pinner Synagogue in London also screened *BESA – THE PROMISE*, a film directed by Jason Williams with the contribution of Norman Gershman. Mrs. Gabby Glasman said: “A tree planted in Jerusalem symbolizes the extraordinary gratitude for the brave acts of the Albanian people who sheltered and saved Jewish refugees during Holocaust.”

Muslim, Jewish, Christian leaders pledge to fight anti-Semitism and Islamophobia at screening of Holocaust film in London



Politicians and leaders of communal organizations signed a declaration, which calls on the country's leaders to commit to condemning anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim and xenophobic speech and action, and to fight intolerance and incitement.

**London, December 10, 2014 - A meeting with the BBC narrator and
Professor of Columbia University, Prof. Simon Schama and Prof.
Jonathan Brent, Director of YIVO Institute of Jewish Studies, New York**



A presentation at the YIVO Institute of Jewish Research in New York



December 14 2014 – A presentation on the life and legacy of US Ambassador Herman Bernstein in Albania, 1930-1933. Herman Bernstein paved the way to save the Jews in Albania, thanks to the excellent relation established with King Zog of Albania.

YIVO Institute of Jewish Studies Director, Prof. Jonathan Brent welcomes the audience



US EMBASSY IN LONDON JUNE 4, 2015



- June 4 2015 - A presentation on the life of US Ambassador Herman Bernstein and his legacy in Albania, at the auditorium of the US Embassy in London. Many diplomats and scholars attended it.

London, Tirane, Prishtine, Pogradec, New York



Jewish Center WJ3 in London welcomes Ambassadors of Albania and Kosovo



January 25 2015: On the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Holocaust the Jewish Center, WJ3 hosted two ambassadors of Albania and Kosovo. An article was published by *The Jerusalem Post*.

RELIGION TOLERANCE
IN ALBANIA
NO ANTI-SEMITISM

ALBANIAN RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE – A MODEL FOR “MODERN” TIMES

In an increasing religiously polarized world where theology is misused for macabre acts of violence, Albania's history of tolerance is a model for the rest of the world. It is a story we must disseminate in order to preserve the values Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed all teach us – benevolent values that do not succumb to terror, threats, or intolerance.

Albania – A country of religious tolerance



US Ambassador Bernstein standing among the
Albanian clergy, 1932

ST. PAUL HAS PREACHED IN ALBANIA



ALBANIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH OF ARDENICA, 1282



ISLAM IN ALBANIA - A NEW AND TOLERANT FAITH



Bektashism – a liberal Islamic sect – promoter of human love



Bernstein on Albanian Religious Tolerance — A Pilgrimage To Elbasan

- Bernstein rightly ascertained that Albanians all share the common faith of Albanianism.
- This fact was reconfirmed on September 21, 2014 when Pope Francis visited Tirana.
- More than three hundred thousand Albanians rushed down in the streets of their capital to greet the Holy Father, half of them being Muslims.

Albania is an example of co-existence between various religions. Upon the arrival of Pope Francis's visit over 300,000 Albanians greeted him at the Mother Teresa square. Amongst this group more than half belonged to the religion of

Islam



Farewell Albania

“Farewell Albania, I thought. You have given me so much: hospitality, refuge, friends, and adventures. Farewell Albania, one day I will tell the world how brave, fearless, strong and faithful your sons are, how death and the devil can't frighten them. If necessary I will tell how they protected this refugee and wouldn't allow her to be harmed even if it meant losing their lives. The gates of your small country remained opened, Albania. Your authorities closed both eyes, when necessary, to give poor prosecuted people another chance to survive the most horrible of all wars. Albania, we survived the siege because of your humanity. We thank you! “

- Irene Grunbom, Jewish survivor in Albania.

Goodbye Albania

“Tirana was to me for three and a half years a most fascinating listening and observation post. I found that though Albania has often been referred to as one of the most sensitive danger zones in Europe, the Albanians are a peace-loving people, and the policy of your government is unquestionably a policy of peace in the Balkans. I visited practically every part of Albania and learned to know and to love your people, whose simplicity, genuineness, hospitality and kindness have left an indelible impression upon me.

--Herman Bernstein

THANK YOU FOR YOUR
TIME AND ATTENTION!

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